

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 September 2004

## Indian plantation workers on indefinite strike

Plantation workers in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh began an indefinite strike on September 13 to demand a pay revision, restoration of curtailed allowances, a welfare scheme for workers on small plantations, and the withdrawal of increased workloads. The strikers are members of the Joint Action Council.

In a separate dispute, power workers at Andhra Pradesh Electricity Department held a lunch-hour protest on the same day outside the offices of the Superintendent Engineer (Vidyut Bhavan) in Cuddapah. They are demanding a bonus for all employees without a salary ceiling, the doubling of credits for medical treatment, and restoration of a medical invalidation scheme. They also want computer operators, typists and revenue billing workers to be officially appointed to their positions.

## Tamilnadu workers protest

Postal workers in cities in Tamilnadu, south India, began fasting campaigns on September 14. They raised several demands, including provision of pensions and no reduction in the pay structure of some categories of employees.

The workers demonstrated outside the main post office in Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli. Railway Mail Service workers and extra-departmental staff also joined a protest of postal employees in Vellore. The Joint Action Committee of the Postal and RMS Employee organised the action.

In a separate dispute, non-unionised daily-paid workers demonstrated in several cities across Tamilnadu on September 9. Employees want a fixed minimum wage, social security, pensions, medical allowances, job protection and other benefits.

In Tirunelveli, workers marched to the Deputy Commissioner of Labour's office while in Dindigul they protested outside the city's labour office. In Madurai, workers held a dharna or sit-in protest after demonstrating.

## Sri Lankan nurses protest equipment and staff shortages

Around 1,000 nurses marched to the Ministry of Health and picketed the building in central Colombo on September 13 to demand an adequate supply of drugs and medical equipment and the filling of all vacancies for nursing staff. The existing workforce is staggering under increased workloads because of thousands of unfilled vacancies. They also want pay increments for additional duties and the reduction of the working week from 40 hours to 36.

Nurses picketed the National Hospital in Colombo on September 14. The demonstrations were organised by the State Nurses Union and the Public Service United Nurses Union.

## Sri Lankan transport workers on strike

Transport workers at the Ruhunu Bus Company's Galle depot, about 115 kilometres south of Colombo, began an indefinite strike on

September 14. The strikers, including drivers, conductors and mechanics, are demanding the payment of salaries due on September 8.

The depot superintendent told the media that head office had not directed the bank to issue the salary payment. The depot, however, has been running at a loss, according to the head office. The strike action stopped more than 100 buses.

## Indonesian factory workers defend union rights

Over 200 police broke up a demonstration of 800 striking workers from rubber glove manufacturer PT Shamrock in Medan, Indonesia, on September 8. The workers were sacked after they walked off the job on August 9 in support of 14 colleagues dismissed for participating in a three-day stoppage in March.

The dismissals arose after 700 workers resigned from the old state-controlled union (SPSI) earlier this year and signed up with rival union, the Independent Workers Union Medan (SBMI). The SBMI called the strike in March to demand an increase in wages to the legal minimum level and for salaries to be paid on time. The strikers, 70 percent women workers, also demanded two days menstruation leave each month and the repair of faulty safety equipment.

The sacked SBMI members have been demonstrating outside the Ministry of Labour offices and the Sumatra provincial governor's building. On August 9, police stood back while 200 company thugs attacked workers and smashed up pickets outside the factory gates.

The young workers say they are determined to secure the reinstatement of their colleagues and want the company to recognise the SBMI.

## Philippines health workers protest for a wage increase

Thirty health workers employed at the Philippines General Hospital (PGH) and the University of the Philippines-Manila (UPM) shaved their heads as part of a protest on September 13. They want a 3,000-peso (\$US53.60) wage increase.

UP-PGH union president Jossel Ebesate said the workers had been asking for the increase for many years without success and decided to shave their heads to "dramatize the protest". He said employees were finding it increasingly difficult to cope with the rising costs of essential commodities.

## Chinese rescue workers find the bodies of trapped miners

The bodies of 10 miners killed in the Tuanjie coal mine accident at Fuyuan in China's Yunnan province were recovered early this week. The men were trapped underground on September 9 after a rock layer above the coal bed suddenly collapsed. Since then, hundreds of rescuers have worked frantically at the site in a desperate attempt to reach the trapped men.

The deaths lift the already high death toll in China's coal mining industry this year. The latest report by the State Bureau for Work

Safety shows that 3,800 died in coal mines in first six months of this year alone.

### **Waterside workers reject union-brokered agreement**

Waterside workers at Patrick Stevedoring's container terminal in Brisbane, Queensland have rejected a Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) recommendation to endorse a new enterprise agreement.

While the agreement has been accepted at the company's 12 other ports, the Brisbane workers reportedly object to the introduction of automated straddle cranes to handle containers. According to the workers, an automated crane ran out of control at a port last October, bypassing an electronic barrier and crashing into a fence. The introduction of the cranes will also allow the company to shed jobs from an already depleted workforce.

While the three-year national enterprise work agreement increases the number of permanent jobs at Patrick, the union has agreed to "maintain flexibility on rostering". Rather than using casuals to meet the irregular nature of the work on the docks, the company will now draw on a pool of "permanent guarantee employees" whose working hours will be tailored to fit in with shipping movements.

In exchange for a 4 percent pay increase annually over the life of the agreement, the MUA allowed the maximum redundancy payment to be reduced from 70-weeks pay to 40. Before the 1998 dock dispute, provoked by Patrick to force through job cuts and sweeping changes to work practices, redundancy payouts were capped at 148-weeks pay.

The union will allow the new agreement to be implemented at other docks, ensuring maximum pressure on its Brisbane members to drop their opposition. The old agreement is due to expire early October.

### **Brewery workers agree to pay offer**

Workers at Cascade Brewery in Hobart, Tasmania, returned to work this week after being stood down without pay on September 9. The lockout occurred after the 35 employees imposed work bans in a dispute for a new enterprise work agreement, including a 5 percent wage increase to ensure parity with brewery workers in other states.

The work bans were imposed after negotiations with the employer—Carlton United Breweries—broke down after six weeks. A spokesman for the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union said its Tasmanian members had voted unanimously to accept a revised pay offer by the company, which he claimed was "comparable to wage agreements reached at other worksites".

### **Mine workers continue strike over wages**

A protracted strike by 80 miners at BHP Billiton's Elouera mine near Wollongong on the New South Wales (NSW) south coast is set to continue after negotiations over a new work and wages agreement broke down this week. The strike, which began a month ago, will be extended for another four weeks.

The miners, members of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), are demanding wage parity with their colleagues at the company's colliery at Appin. The union warned that industry action at Elouera could begin to affect other mines in the area.

### **Manufacturing workers walk out for 48-hours**

About 400 workers at metal fabricator Comsteel in Newcastle, NSW went on strike for 48 hours on September 14. The workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications Electrical and the Plumbing Union, are seeking a 4.5 percent pay increase and the introduction of an income protection insurance scheme.

### **New Zealand port workers end strike**

Two hundred port workers returned to work this week after the NZ

Maritime Union and the Port of Auckland began mediation over the use of casual labour at the port's container terminals. Waterside workers struck for four days late last week in a dispute that the union claimed would set "benchmark" employment conditions for ports throughout the country.

At a post-strike stopwork meeting on September 13, workers voted to authorise a further strike action over seven days if required. Union officials, however, claimed there been enough "movement" by the company to forestall immediate industrial action.

The key issue was an agreement on a formula for promoting casual workers to the permanent workforce. An Auckland union branch spokesman declined to give details of the management offer, but said it was in the "right direction". The port company claims that only 10 percent of the total workforce is casual, below the 25 percent quota allowed under an existing agreement with the union.

### **New Zealand nurses union takes pay dispute to mediation**

The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and representatives of the country's 21 District Health Boards (DHBs) agreed to mediation this week after nurses rejected a \$329 million pay offer.

The offer, made public last week, would have resulted in pay increases ranging from 6.1 percent to 27 percent over three years. Nurses, however, instructed the union to get a better deal or give notice of industrial action. They are seeking pay equivalency with teachers and police, and say that the new offer still keeps 75 percent of nurses below comparable rates.

An NZNO spokesperson last week said the boards' declaration that they could not improve the offer amounted to a breakdown in talks. The union then claimed that after the nurses' rejection vote the situation has "progressed constructively" and negotiations were scheduled to resume again on September 22. The NZNO has not issued a strike notice and said it would "exhaust all possibilities of resolving the issues" before doing so.

### **New Caledonia newspaper strike enters second week**

Striking workers at New Caledonia's only newspaper, *Nouvelles Caledoniennes*, ignored a court order this week to dismantle their picket outside the publisher's premises and are continuing strike action. The strike by 20 out of 150 workers is to secure the removal of a manager.



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